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ABSTRACT

Building on the efforts of the ASPIIRE IDEA Partnership Paraprofessional Work Group convened under the leadership of the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) in the spring of 1999, this report summarizes issues and themes identified at a June 2001, 1-day cross-partnership forum on paraprofessional issues relating to the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act as amended in 1997 (IDEA '97). The forum identified six overarching themes: (1) confusion and misunderstanding about roles, responsibilities and supervision of paraprofessionals and assistants by professional practitioners, administrators, and families; (2) lack of clear federal, state and local policies and standards; (3) need for consensus about who/what is a paraprofessional; (4) inadequate training for administrators, professional practitioners, and paraprofessionals/assistants regarding appropriate roles, responsibilities, and supervision; (5) inadequate opportunities for instructional/related services teams to plan, collaborate, and support one another's efforts; and (6) need for systematic infrastructures and administrative support for training, team collaboration/planning, and utilization of appropriate practice. Recommendations of the forum related to these themes are addressed to the Office of Special Education Programs and to the states, and are organized into the following categories: policy and regulatory procedures, preparation and training, supervision, IDEA partnerships, and next steps. Attachments include an excerpt from IDEA-97 on paraprofessionals and assistants and a listing of forum participants. (DB)

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# IDEA Partnerships
# PARAPROFESSIONAL INITIATIVE

Report to the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP)

**December 2001**

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## Acknowledgments

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The **American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA)** is proud to be a Primary Partner of the ASPIIRE IDEA Partnership. AOTA is the lead partner in the development of the Paraprofessional Initiative. The IDEA Partnerships acknowledge and greatly appreciate the leadership provided by AOTA that catalyzed the efforts of so many partner organizations and experts who provided input to this initiative. The development of this report and activities contributing to it were supported by the ASPIIRE IDEA Partnership. All materials disseminated from this Partnership have been reviewed by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. Special appreciation is extended to Dr. Selete Avoké, ASPIIRE Project Officer.

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[1]Associations of Service Providers Implementing IDEA Reforms in Education Partnership
[2]Families and Advocates Partnership for Education, IDEA Local Implementation by Local Administrators, The Policymaker Partnership

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# IDEA Partnerships
# PARAPROFESSIONAL INITIATIVE

**Report to the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP)**
**December 2001**

## History of the Initiative

In the spring of 1999, the ASPIIRE IDEA Partnership[1] Paraprofessional Work Group was convened under the leadership of the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) to identify and address issues ensuring that paraprofessionals are appropriately trained and supervised as required by the 1997 Amendments to IDEA. Key members of the multi-disciplinary Work Group included staff representing the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA), American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, (ASHA), National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals (NRCP), National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE), American Federation of Teachers (AFT), Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), a representative of a teacher education program, AOTA, and the IDEA Partnerships.

**VISION –**

*Paraprofessionals and assistants are appropriately utilized to deliver early intervention and special education and related services under IDEA, which fosters the provision of high quality services and maximization of child/learner outcomes. Minimal gaps exist between administrative policies and actual practices, and decisions to assign paraprofessionals and assistants are primarily based on child/learner need not exclusively on costs.*

– ASPIIRE Paraprofessional Work Group

The initial goals of the Work Group were to develop consensus on a definition of paraprofessionals and assistants that acknowledged the supervisory roles of licensed or certified professional staff and the critical need for paraprofessionals/assistants to be appropriately trained. In addition to arriving at a consensus on a definition and training of paraprofessionals, the group also identified the need for a series of resources to support the efforts of policymakers, administrators, personnel developers, and practitioners to establish policies, standards, and systems that would ensure the availability of a skilled, and appropriately supervised workforce. The developmental efforts of the Work Group centered on drafting 1) a checklist to assess state and local policies and procedures to enable SEAs (State Education Agencies) and LEAs (Local Education Agencies) to identify needs and methods to improve the work of professional and paraprofessional teams, 2) standards that SEAs, LEAs and IHEs (Institutions of Higher Education) can use to establish and assess professional practitioners and paraprofessional preparation programs, and 3) indicators of the quality and appropriateness of paraprofessional preparation and other supplemental materials for administrators and teachers. In addition the Work Group recommended that the ASPIIRE Partnership produce brochures and other resources that would assist the efforts of State and local education agencies to improve the performance of professional and paraprofessional teams.

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[1] The IDEA Partnerships, ASPIIRE, FAPE, ILIAD and PMP are funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. The Partnerships represent parents, advocates, teachers and related service providers, administrators, and policy makers working together to improve special education for children.



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Building on the efforts of the ASPIIRE Paraprofessional Work Group, a one-day cross-partnership Forum on paraprofessional issues was held, which included thirty-five representatives of professional associations, higher education, federal, state and local agencies and special projects, and individual professional practitioners, paraprofessionals/assistants and families. The Forum's design and purpose are further described below. **This report is a summation of the issues and themes identified at the Forum in June 2001. Work Group findings are included in sidebar statements, which support the themes emerging from the transcripts of the Forum.** Attachment B includes a list of participants and the organizations and groups represented in the Work Group and in the Forum.

## Definitions

Forum participants used the work of the multi-disciplinary Work Group, which developed definitions for the term *paraprofessional* and the phrase *appropriately trained and supervised* based on the requirements in several sections of IDEA '97. Work Group members and Forum participants felt the need to define the above term and phrase since neither is defined in the statute or its implementing regulations. The language from IDEA is contained in Attachment A. The definition is provided below.

> The **paraprofessional** is an employee who, following appropriate training, performs tasks as prescribed and supervised by the licensed/certified professional/practitioner. Paraprofessionals perform specific duties as directed by the licensed/certified professional/practitioner. The licensed/certified professional/practitioner maintains responsibility for assessing the learner and family needs, and for planning, evaluating, and modifying programs.

It is important to note that the technically educated "assistant" and "paraeducator" were seen as synonymous (as both are assistants to the professions), and both are included in the definition of "paraprofessional" listed above.

The Work Group also agreed that to define **appropriately trained and supervised**, individuals must refer to State health, education, social services, mental health and labor law, regulation or written policy, and professional and education association policies that specify policies of best practice.

## Forum Design and Purpose

When the cross-partnership Forum convened, participants were asked to:

- Identify issues and needs of administrators, parents, teachers, related services personnel, and paraprofessionals/assistants in addressing the roles, supervision, and preparation of instructional and service teams in relation to IDEA '97 implementation;
- Recommend strategies to address these issues and needs for federal or state policy, federal or state training and other resources and activities of the IDEA Partnership projects or individual constituencies;
- Provide recommendations for ILIAD, ASPIIRE, FAPE, and/or PMP products and activities that would be most beneficial to the partners in educating their constituencies about the roles, supervision and preparation of instructional and service teams in relation to IDEA'97 implementation; and
- Identify next steps.

The Forum's facilitators utilized large and small group activities to promote discussion of the issues and needs and identified strategies and other recommendations to meet them. Small and large group discussions centered on roles, supervision, and preparation. Within each of these categories,

participants were asked to make specific recommendations related to federal and state policy, federal and state training and other resources, products, and activities of the IDEA Partnerships and individual constituents.

## Overarching Themes

Several **overarching themes** were identified from the discussions at the Forum. These themes were consistent with Work Group findings as well as previous literature reviews. They are:

1. Confusion and misunderstanding about roles, responsibilities and supervision of paraprofessionals and assistants by professional practitioners, administrators, and families;
2. Lack of clear federal, state and local policies and standards;
3. Need for consensus about who/what is a paraprofessional;
4. Inadequate training for administrators, professional practioners, and paraprofessionals/assistants regarding appropriate roles, responsibilities, and supervision;
5. Inadequate opportunities for instructional/related services teams to plan, collaborate, and support one another's efforts;
6. Need for systematic infrastructures and administrative support for training, team collaboration/planning, and utilization of appropriate practice.

These themes and key points from the Forum discussions are grouped into four general categories discussed below.

### Policy and Regulatory Procedures

#### ■ Lack of clear federal, state and local policies and standards.

The Forum identified a need for:

- Clear definitions or standards regarding the utilization of paraprofessionals/assistants in IDEA '97.
- State agencies to monitor local efforts to develop and implement standards and policies relative to paraprofessionals/assistants.
- A change in the institutional and attitudinal barriers about the value and importance of paraprofessionals/assistants.
- A clarification of the liability of team members/professional practitioners for the actions of assigned paraprofessionals/assistants.
- A federal and state role in monitoring requirements for paraprofessionals/assistants.

### Roles and Responsibilities

#### ■ Confusion and misunderstanding about roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals/assistants by professional practitioners, administrators, and families.

The Forum identified a need for:

- A definition of the term "paraprofessional/assistant."
- Appropriate assignments for paraprofessionals/assistants.
- Meaningful job descriptions and consistent job titles.
- Clarification about and distinctions between job title vs. role as paraprofessional or assistant.
- Clarification of the personnel who may be involved in inclusive classrooms or environments and descriptions of when and how services should be provided.
- Families to understand who is responsible for service delivery for their children.
- Identification of core paraprofessional roles with skill hierarchy for various levels of paraprofessionals/assistants.

## Preparation and Training

### ■ Lack of systemic infrastructures and administrative support for training paraprofessionals/assistants.

The Forum identified a need for:

- Ongoing professional development that reflects national, state, and local policies concerning standards, accountability and best practice.
- Improved entry-level training, mentoring, and orientation.
- Infrastructures that support the training and career development of paraprofessionals/assistants.
- Opportunities for paraprofessionals to implement newly learned strategies.
- Training of team members to enhance their ability to work together.

### ■ Inadequate training relative to appropriate supervision.

The Forum identified a need for:

- All team members to understand the roles and responsibilities of other team members relative to service design and delivery, supervision and evaluation.
- Professional practitioners to be prepared for their role as supervisors.

## Supervision

### ■ Confusion and misunderstanding about supervision of paraprofessionals/assistants among professional practitioners and administrators.

The Forum identified a need for:

- Administrators to understand differences in staff roles and responsibilities in order to develop staffing patterns to meet individual learners' needs.
- Determining who is responsible for paraprofessional/assistant supervision (i.e., teachers, administrators, related services personnel) and when.

- Training required to prepare all personnel for their roles and responsibilities as it relates to preparing professional practitioners on how to supervise paraprofessionals/assistants.
- Administrative support for time to plan, acquisition of appropriate equipment and resources, and development of professional environments for instruction.
- Families to understand who is directing and monitoring the performance of paraprofessionals/assistants.

■ **Inadequate opportunities for instructional/service teams to plan, collaborate, and support one another's efforts.**

The Forum identified a need for:

- Paraprofessionals/assistants to understand the chain of communication to facilitate the reporting of problems.
- Time for teams to meet on a regular basis.

## Recommendations of Forum Participants

Forum participants suggested strategies and recommendations to address the issues and needs they identified relative to paraprofessional/assistant roles, supervision and preparation. Recommendations related to policy and regulatory procedures, preparation and training, and supervision are listed below. While there is overlap and many of the recommendations could fall in more than one category, each is placed in a category of most relevance. Related highlights from the Work Group report are noted in the boxes.

### Policy and Regulatory Procedures

OSEP should:

- Clarify and strengthen requirements related to roles, supervision and training of paraprofessionals/assistants.
- Define the paraprofessional/assistant role and the related supervisory role.
- Provide appropriate indicators for monitoring supervision of paraprofessionals/assistants within states.
- Monitor state policies to facilitate the development of state standards and infrastructures for the appropriate supervision and training of paraprofessionals/assistants.

> *A common language and terminology related to paraprofessionals/assistants which includes distinctions between roles and job titles is needed.*
>
> – ASPIIRE Work Group

States should:

- Establish a set of core roles and responsibilities for all paraprofessionals/assistants with appropriate distinctions between various roles and disciplines.
- Establish standards for paraprofessional/assistant roles and training, preparation and supervision.
- Establish state guidelines for supervisory competencies for all professional personnel.

- Revise licensure systems to include competencies or standards for supervision of paraprofessionals/assistants.
- Establish policies to promote adequate time for teams to plan, train and supervise.
- Establish appropriate career ladder opportunities via salaries, collective bargaining agreements and state legislation.
- Include paraprofessional/assistant issues, practices, and indicators as part of state monitoring process and state report card.

> *Ongoing research should be undertaken to identify appropriate outcome measures, particularly related to services provided by paraprofessionals and assistants. This would also include a system for collecting data on numbers of paraprofessionals needed.*
>
> - ASPIRE Work Group Report

## Preparation and Training

- Federal Projects of National Significance should be established to facilitate training for related service providers, paraprofessionals, teachers, early childhood providers, and administrators.
- Federal funding for training should be provided to help States build infrastructure for ongoing training and technical assistance; involve CSPD/SIG and IHEs.
- A priority should be established supporting a national effort for technical assistance and dissemination for paraprofessionals.
- Team building activities and workshops using existing validated materials should be provided to teachers and paraprofessionals.
- Effective models of teacher-paraprofessional-parent teams should be identified and disseminated.

> *There should be a systematic, competency-based mechanism for professional development at both the preservice and in-service/continuing education levels, which would address needs of both professional practioners and paraprofessional/assistants. The training activities would include attention to issues of responsibility, accountability and service delivery in natural/inclusive environments.*
>
> - ASPIRE Work Group Report

## Supervision

- Appropriate job performance evaluations for paraprofessionals should be conducted
- Guidelines for mentoring 1st year teachers, administrators and paraprofessionals should be developed and disseminated.

> *Resources to support time for collaborative planning and communication between teachers, parents, therapists, support personnel, and administrators should be available, which set the foundation for the development of trust and team cohesiveness. This collaborative effort will also foster information exchange to help administrators make appropriate staffing decisions based on child/learner need, maintain a system of high quality services, allow for the appropriate decision-making processes when paraprofessionals/assistants are used, and assure adequate safeguards for lines of responsibility and accountability.*
>
> – ASPIIRE Work Group Report



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## Forum Recommendations for IDEA Partnerships

Following are priority recommendations for specific practice-related products and activities of the IDEA Partnerships.

1. Develop video and web-based materials on effective practices in the supervision of paraprofessionals, which would include definitions, roles, and examples such as salary comparisons, career ladders, training programs, research and literature (all four Partnerships in collaboration with the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals).
2. Analyze definitions, distinctions, and systems across disciplines to identify consensus relative to policy, practice, and vision regarding roles of paraprofessionals, teachers, administrators and related service providers.
3. The four IDEA Partnerships should provide funding to partners to produce an array of training materials for use at the local level, including distance learning structures, modules/videos, and web site video-streaming.
4. Expand ASPIIRE/ILIAD National Resource Cadre to include paraprofessionals and actively recruit paraprofessionals.
5. Encourage and support PMP and state legislators to advocate for increased salary and career ladders for paraprofessionals in state budgets.
6. Convene a think tank or focus group to define issues and recommended strategies in the area of "off-site" or "indirect" paraprofessional supervision.
7. Facilitate the development and implementation of activities that will be sustained beyond the funding cycle of the IDEA Partnerships.

> *All activities and training should be developed and provided in a cross-disciplinary fashion.*
>
> – ASPIIRE Work Group Report

## Next Steps

The following recommendations are proposed to help guide the collaborative activities of the Partnerships Coordinating Committee (IDEA Partnerships), over the final two years of the projects. Discussions have occurred among the four IDEA Partnerships emphasizing personnel issues as a central focus of their collaborative work. To that end, seven recommendations follow, which are presented for consideration by the IDEA Partnerships Coordinating Committee and OSEP.

1. Design and offer Brown Bag Seminars to OSEP staff, OSEP technical assistance and dissemination providers, and others in the U.S. Department of Education. These seminars would be organized to highlight findings from this report.

2. Finalize the *Checklist of Quality Indicators for States and Locales* previously developed by the Work Group. Disseminate it to States and locales interested in assessing their personnel development systems relative to the inclusion of paraprofessionals and assistants. Areas addressed in the checklist include: Definitions and demographics, roles and responsibilities, supervision, training, credentialing, government and stakeholder policies and practices.

> *Promising and effective practices in the use of paraprofessionals and assistants to provide services under IDEA must be developed and shared.*
>
> – ASPIIRE Work Group Report

3. Develop a videotape to prepare educators and other professional staff such as related services personnel to direct work of paraprofessionals and assistants who provide services to students with disabilities.

4. Develop a videotape to be used to prepare administrators for their role in supporting collaboration of educators, related services staff, and paraprofessionals/assistants.

5. Promote review of pre-service preparation requirements for administrators and the entry-level standards for educators to ensure that expectations are in place to prepare administrators and educators who can appropriately train and supervise paraprofessionals/assistants.

6. Coordinate efforts of existing web sites (i.e., IDEAPractices, NRCP, NCPSE) to offer meaningful information to state and local policymakers and professional practitioners. The web site material would be organized to promote the Quality Indicators and implementation strategies.

# Attachment A

IDEA '97 Language Related to Paraprofessionals and Assistants

## IDEA '97 - Use of Paraprofessionals and Assistants

**From the IDEA '97 Regulations**

Section 300, Subpart B: State & Local Eligibility - Specific Conditions Personnel Standards

"A State may allow paraprofessionals and assistants who are appropriately trained and supervised, in accordance with State law, regulations, or written policy, in meeting the requirements of this part to be used to assist in the provision of special education and related services to children with disabilities under Part B of the Act " [34 CFR Section 300.136(f)]

Part C - 303.360(b) Comprehensive System of Personnel Development

"The personnel development system of this part must -
(3) Provide for the training of a variety of personnel needed to meet the requirements of this part, including public and private providers, primary referral source, paraprofessionals, and persons who will serve as case coordinators."

From the IDEA '97 Statute

Part D: Subpart 1 - State Program Improvement Grants for Children with Disabilities

(c) Each State improvement plan shall (3) describe the strategies the State will use to address the needs identified under subsection (b), including:
(D) how the State will address the identified needs for in-service and pre-service preparation to ensure that all personnel who work with children with disabilities (including professional and paraprofessional personnel who provide special education, general education, related services, or early intervention services) have the skills and knowledge necessary to meet the needs of children with disabilities, including a description of how:
(ii) the State will prepare professionals and paraprofessionals in the area of early intervention with the content knowledge and collaborative skills needed to meet the needs of infants and toddlers with disabilities. [PL 105-17, Section 653(c)(3)(D)(ii)].

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# Attachment B

ASPIIRE Paraprofessional Work Group Participant List

Cross-Partnership Forum Participant List

**ASPIIRE Paraprofessional Work Group Participant List**

| | |
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| Sue Abderholden | FAPE |
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| Senobia Crawford | American Physical Therapy Association |
| Johnna Timmes | ASPIIRE |
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| Anna Lou Pickett | National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals |
| Arlene Barresi | American Federation of Teachers |
| Dianne Dulicai | National Alliance of Pupil Services Organizations |
| Kent Gerlach | ASPIIRE Consultant |
| Selete Avoké | U.S. Department of Education, OSEP |

**Cross-Partnership Forum Participant List***

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| Rosalia Fajardo | U.S. Department of Education/OSEP |
| Nancy Fire | NEC*TAS (Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center) |
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| Marcella Kehr | Baltimore County Board of Education |
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| Jane Norwood | National Alliance of Black School Educators |
| Patricia Olshelski | American Federation of Teachers |
| Anna Lou Pickett | National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals |
| Virginia Richardson | Parent Advocacy Coalition for Education Rights |
| Lisa Thomas | American Federation of Teachers |
| Jo Thomason | Council of Administrators of Special Education |
| Teri Wallace | National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals |
| Richard White | University of North Carolina at Charlotte |
| Frank Williams | Central Susquehanna |
| Sharon Willig | WESTAT Inc. |

*Forum participants were selected based on their representation across the four IDEA Partnership Projects.

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